

SILENT SUFFERING

Sylvia Jean had terminal cancer, but rather than rejecting the cross, she accepted it as God's will and as an opportunity to offer up more pain for her beloved priests

By Jude Winkler, OFM Conv.

SAINTS and holy people come in all shapes and sizes. You don't always know who they are when you first meet them. It is only after observing their way of life and experiencing their profound spirituality that one can identify them more clearly.

I had the privilege of meeting one of these hidden, holy ones a number of years ago. I was invited to give a workshop to a group of priests and deacons in the diocese of San Diego, California. Fr Michael Murphy, the director of continuing formation in that diocese, had invited me to his diocese and parish to give a presentation on the Gospel to be used in the liturgy that coming year.

Painful malady

That Saturday night, Fr Mike told me that two women in the parish had prepared a special meal for the priests in the parish, and especially to celebrate my visit. When I walked into the dining room, I was impressed with how carefully the table had been set. As the meal went on, I realized that those who had prepared the meal had taken great care to make sure it

A gifted auto mechanic, Sylvia Jean Alvarado worked for many years in the Jeep division of American Motors



was as grand as possible. Everything was made with great love, often from recipes passed down in their families.

When I was introduced to the two women who had done all of this, I naturally shook their hands. I am always careful when I shake the hand of a woman to make sure that I do not squeeze too hard, so I was surprised when one of them, Sylvia Jean Alvarado, winced in pain. I didn't know what was going on. It was only later that Fr Mike explained to me that she had bone cancer and was in pain all the time.

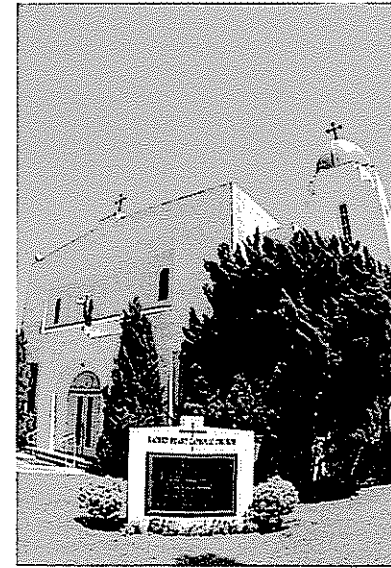
Later, as we were talking, Fr Mike also explained that Sylvia Jean had a tremendous love and respect for priests. This was why she had offered

up all of her sufferings for the sanctification of priests. She had already had this form of horribly painful cancer for a number of years, and was to continue to suffer for many more years – over ten years in all.

No shrinking violet

When one hears of this, one might imagine a slight, pious person. Sylvia Jean was no shrinking violet. Her nickname was Ace, and she acquired this nickname when she was working with the American Motors Company. She was an expert in the maintenance of Jeeps (the all-terrain vehicles that used to be employed by the US Army). Not only that, she built her own vehicles and raced them in long races (500 and 1,000 miles across some of the most difficult terrain in North America). In fact, only one week after she was diagnosed with cancer, she won the Baja 1000 (Baja being the desert peninsula which is found south of the state of California).

At the same time, Sylvia Jean had a tender side. She loved flowers and plants, with which she decorated the grounds of Sacred Heart Parish where she lived, and where she served as manager of the physical plant. She loved animals and they sensed her gentleness and goodness. Her pet dog was one of the ugliest dogs that I ever saw. There was a reason for this. Unfortunately, in certain areas there is still the practice of having dogs fight with each other. In order to train the dogs to be ferocious, they toss a more gentle dog into the ring so that the other dogs attack and kill it. One of those dogs, one of the ones sacrificed to bring out the ferocity in the others, found



its way to the parish property. Sylvia Jean and Fr Mike rescued it and took it to the veterinarian for extensive treatment. It was scared and broken, but it was unconditionally faithful to Sylvia Jean who had cared for it when it most needed it.

Lighting a candle

Sylvia Jean understood what it was to be broken. Her childhood had been traumatic, filled with pain and sadness. It had taken her a lifetime to heal, but rather than using that experience as an excuse for bad treatment of others, she devoted herself to service and care. The parishioners spoke of her simplicity, her sense of humour, etc. Even when she was closed in her room with her suffering, one felt an atmosphere of peace exude from her Calvary.

While she lovingly embraced her cross, she did not really want to suffer. It was a mystery to her why she had survived so long when the course of her illness was normally much more restricted. But rather than rejecting the cross, she accepted it as God's will and as an opportunity to offer up more pain for her beloved priests.

Sylvia Jean was not oblivious to the scandals that were afflicting the Church. But her response was not to curse the darkness. She lit a candle to light up that darkness. She wanted to help to heal the Church with her love. She recognized the incredible gift God had given the Church in the ability of priests to consecrate the Eucharist and forgive sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. She only wanted priests to reflect the holiness of these

Sylvia was a resident of Coronado, California, serving for fifteen years as Director of Facilities at Sacred Heart Parish

sacraments and their lives more fully to the world which so needs their example and love.

Changing in the world

What good does it do, however, to offer up one's suffering? Suffering is something that normally isolates one from others. We feel as if others do not understand what we are going through. We do not want to bother them with our difficulties because they have enough of their own problems. We feel as if we are on the cross, and when we look out there is no one standing there to accompany us in our passion.

But Jesus is there. He suffered out of love for us. He has joined His suffering to ours so that we never have to be alone again. To give a visual image, when we are on that cross and looking out and seeing no one and feeling abandoned, we only have to realize that He is on the other side of the cross. We will never be alone again.

Likewise, when we offer up our sufferings for others, we are there with them in a mystical way. They no longer have to carry their crosses alone (whether it be the crosses of everyday life or crosses imposed by others or even self-imposed crosses of sin and selfishness). Our suffering becomes an expression of love and concern for them. We join them in compassion (a word which literally means 'to suffer with'). This is not something that one can measure or verify, but it is a real expression of love that heals.

So when Sylvia Jean offered up her suffering, she certainly influenced those priests who knew what she was doing. I, myself, was humbled by this expression of love, and I know that it helped me to be a better priest. But even priests who had never heard of her somehow sensed that they were being loved. They might not have known what it was, but at some level

of their being they knew that they were not alone.

Did Sylvia Jean change the world? Absolutely! Rather than complaining or being frustrated or just ignoring the problem, she did what she could to make it better, for she knew that the holier priests were the more likely they are to share Christ's love with those who need it most.

Sylvia Jean passed away on May 1, 2011, the Feast of Divine Mercy. After a long battle with cancer her Calvary was over. She is now one with the Great High Priest whom she served so long by offering up the sacrifice of her love and suffering on the altar of her life. ♦

PRAYER FOR PRIESTS



- Gentle God, I offer to you holy priesthood, that they may continue to sacrifice in completing your will.
- Gentle God, I offer to you my pain that holy priesthood, a journey of sacrifice, will be a journey of great love.
- Gentle God, in my offering today I pray that holy priesthood accepts change – a journey of holiness.
- Gentle God, in my offering today I pray for all my priests that accepting sacrifice means simplicity.
- Gentle God, for holy priesthood I offer to you all that I am not, that they can accept sacrifice – a letting go – to why am I so loved.

– Sylvia Jean Alvarado